

15

YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE

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You may wish to think that your sorrows and miseries are caused by a family curse handed down from one generation to another. Or perhaps they arise because of some sins committed by a distant ancestor who has now returned from the grave to torment you. Or maybe your sorrows are created by God, or the Devil.

Yet, have you considered for a moment that the cause may really lie with – **yourself!** Yes, yourself! You have caused your own failure, hardship, and unhappiness. But is it not convenient – ‘human nature’ you might say – to place the blame on others, rather than seeing yourself as being responsible for them?

• Often when a man is forced to see his own weakness, he avoids it and instead gives in to self-deceit. He will search his brain for an excuse, even the lamest one will do, to justify his actions. He may succeed in doing

this. Sometimes he succeeds so well in trying to fool others, that he even manages to fool himself with the very ghost created by his mind.

A person may fool some of the people some of the time, but not all the people all of the time. “The fool” according to the Buddha, “who does not admit he is a fool is a real fool. And the fool who admits he is a fool is wise to that extent.”

If you have made a mistake, then admit it. You need courage, of course to admit that you have fallen victim to it and make that admission no matter how unpleasant that may be. You also need wisdom to see your own faults.

The Buddha did say: **“Easily seen are others’ faults; hard indeed to see one’s own faults.”** You should not evade self-responsibility for your own actions by blaming them on circumstances. During times of difficulties and trying moments, work on cheerfully instead of showing a sour face. Be courageous to change if change is necessary; be serene enough to accept what you cannot change, and be wise to know the difference.

Do not think that you have been unlucky, or is an unfortunate victim of fate. Face your shortcomings. You must realize that your mind has created the conditions which give rise to the miseries and difficulties you are experiencing. It is only after you have truly realized this fact and do not succumb to self-deceit, that you can begin to create conditions necessary for your happiness.

Cause of Your Troubles

According to the Buddha, man makes his own destiny. He should not blame anyone for his troubles since he alone is responsible for his own life – for better or for worse.

Man creates everything – all his griefs and misfortunes as well as his happiness and success. Others may exert an influence over his life, yet it is he who actually creates his own *karma* (through his intentional reactions). He must therefore be responsible for the effects. Seen in this light, there is no human being or *deva* who can direct or control a person's attainment of ultimate salvation – or downfall. Acting with pure heart and mind, all his words and actions become pure. However, acting with polluted heart and mind, he continues to create evil actions which will shape his character and destiny.

You may be a person who is good and harmless by nature, yet you are blamed by others. You have your share of difficulties and disappointments even if you have assisted others without a thought for yourself. You might then ask, "If good begets good, bad begets bad, why should I have to suffer when I'm completely innocent? Why should I have to undergo so many difficulties and disappointments? Why should I be blamed despite my good work?"

The answer is a simple one: you do not know you are now facing a past bad *karma* that is ripening. Continue with your good work, and soon you will be free

from such troubles. You have created your own disappointments and you alone can overcome them by realizing the nature of your own action – *Karma* as taught by the Buddha.

Your troubles and difficulties are really self-caused. They arise from actions rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. In fact, suffering is the price you pay for craving for existence and sensual pleasures.

The price which comes as physical pain and mental agony is a heavy one to pay. It is like paying rental or taxes for the house you occupy. The “rental” is the physical pain and mental agony you undergo, while the “house” is your physical body through which you experience the worldly pleasures of the senses. You have to pay the price for the enjoyment: nothing is really free of charge, unfortunately.

So long as you are caught in the iron pincers of craving, you experience pain and agony. However, if you wish to reduce or eliminate that pain, you will have to subdue, and even renounce, your strong craving for sensual pleasure. You are confronted with a choice: to enjoy sensual pleasure you must be prepared to experience suffering, or to renounce craving so as to delight in spiritual happiness. There are no two ways about it.

Who is Responsible?

There is an old saying which goes: “The uncultured man always blames others; the semicultured man blames

himself, and the fully-cultured man blames neither." You must learn to face and handle your problems like the fully cultured man in that quotation. Do not try to find a convenient scapegoat on which to place your blame, as many are inclined to do. Many people find scapegoats in a person or group of people so easily that they are unable to see their own mistakes staring at them.

"Alright," you may say, "I will not blame anyone. I have only myself to blame." No, you must not even blame yourself. Finger-pointing at others or yourself is negative and will not bring you any nearer to the solution of your problems. Put aside fault-finding. Instead have courage and understanding. The cultivation of a positive frame of mind will help to solve many of your problems, and also make the world a much better place to live in for everyone.

If you can avoid blaming, both yourself and others, then you may begin to realize that you are at one with the world. You are part and parcel of all things and inseparable from the world. Therefore, the world is good if you are good, and bad if you are bad. You will not try to escape from your problems by blaming the world, by saying that the world is wrong while you are right.

When you begin to see things as they are and not as they appear to be, you will understand that there is really no one to be blamed. And yet, in the highest sense, it takes wisdom to realize that you are responsible for everything.

Ways to Reduce Your Troubles

From this section onwards you may find some useful advice on how to overcome your difficulties, and find harmony, peace and happiness with yourself and others.

1. Facing your problems:

Whenever certain difficulties and problems arise, a person should try to understand them in the context of the nature of existence. He cannot expect things to be perfect, conditions congenial, and all his plans to run smoothly all the time; yet, these are the very things he craves for. The truth is that the more desire he has for things to remain unchanging, congenial and perfect, the greater will be his disappointment when the reverse occurs. Like the waxing and waning of the moon, all things change, not always in the desired direction.

This fluxing state of fortunes, circumstances, and states of mind represents the worldly conditions*. The Buddha spoke about the eight worldly conditions which afflict all worldlings: gain and loss, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, happiness and sorrow. The nature of the world is such that one cannot expect to experience good conditions all the time.

When conditions are unfavourable, you may feel during such times that you have come to the road-end, and the whole world is against you.

* Read more about these conditions in the "Facts of Life" by Narada Thera.

But before allowing everything around you to collapse, just compare the degree of pain you suffer with that experienced by others more unfortunate than yourself. If you are frustrated at losing your wallet to a pick-pocket, think of the suffering endured by people who have lost their homes and entire life-savings in a fire or flood. If you feel depressed at not being born with a pretty face, think of the many others who are born blind, dumb, deformed, crippled and mentally retarded. Compared to the troubles of others, your troubles become insignificant. In other words, if you are to change your attitude so as to count your blessings instead of troubles, you will find yourself better off than many others.

As an old Chinese saying has it: "If you have a big problem, reduce it to a small problem. If you have a small problem, reduce it to no problem". You will be surprised how many of your worries disappear when problems are seen in their proper perspective. You may wish to recall your previous experiences on how you were able to overcome the difficulties at first thought to be insurmountable. By so doing, you will not be overwhelmed by the problems, and you will be able to solve those problems with your mental and physical resources. Just think that the problem you are facing is not the worst that can ever happen, and that you have been through bigger problems before. Then face

your problem squarely and use your mental prowess to get over, under, around or through the problem. Many of your problems evaporate into thin air if you have such resolution. Even if the problem turns out to be worse than you expected, when you emerge out of it your self-confidence will grow with the knowledge that you are really stronger than you thought you were.

Everyone faces problems, though each will react and adjust to them differently. Given a similar set of troubles, some treat them lightly, appearing hale and hearty. Some look forward to problems, considering them as “challenges” which can motivate them to use fully their mental and physical energies. On the other hand, some break down or are overwhelmed and be made completely incapacitated by the troubles. Problems there always are. The crux of the matter is not so much as how to escape from all troubles but how you would handle them without creating other problems.

2. Responsibility for Inner Peace:

The calm and peace within a person’s mind can either be prolonged or dissipated depending on his mental attitude. His inner peace can be maintained with self-surrender and the casting away of pride. If he were to cling to the false ego and maintain a negative attitude, trouble and an unsettled mind

soon result. In his effort to promote his selfish goals and narrow interest, he makes himself unbearable to others and brings harm to himself. On the other hand, regardless of external conditions, a person can have happiness through maintaining a balanced mind and a positive attitude. And that happy state is lost only because he allows external conditions to upset it.

For instance, let us assume that a criticism has just been made about you or your work. Very often, in such a situation you may feel insulted. Your ego may be damaged. But before you let such thought arise, examine that criticism objectively. On the one hand, if the criticism given is well-founded and arises with good intention, you should accept that criticism in good faith so as to use it constructively for self-improvement. On the other hand, if it is unjust, ill-founded and given with bad intention, there is still no person to lose your temper and to retaliate, just ignore the criticism since it is untrue and you are under no obligation to accept it.

Such should be your attitude towards all criticisms – constructive or negative. If you have acted with sincere motives and your actions are commended by the wise, then you should not be deterred from performing good works because of an unkind tongue. Take comfort by following the Dhamma (truth) which will be your protection. The

Buddha said: "Whoever harms a harmless person, one pure and guiltless, upon that very fool evil recoils like fine dust thrown against the wind." And you will not feel hurt unless you allow others to succeed in doing it.

In addition, the mental attitude you have towards others can determine the attitude you receive in return. If you show love and kindness to others, you will receive that love and kindness reflected back to you. But if you show hatred, then hatred will be your only reward. Do not expect to receive love in return for hatred, charity for selfishness, and sympathy for thoughtlessness. You are responsible for creating and promoting good relationships with others so that peace rather than trouble will prevail.

3. **Superiority, Equality and Inferiority:**

You can avoid having unnecessary worry and trouble if you refrain from comparing yourself with others. By itself the act of comparison may not be wrong if it inspires you to become wiser in thought and nobler in deeds. But, too often, comparing yourself with others to see who is 'superior' leads to conceit and unnecessary worry. If you think you are equal to others, you may become complacent and stagnate. If you think you are inferior to others, you may become timid and helpless. Therefore to avoid having such negative mental states, refrain

from making comparisons.

It may be useful to remember that superiority, equality, and inferiority are relative states which change constantly with time, place and circumstances. In the endless rounds within the ocean of life and death (*samsara*), we have all been superior, equal and inferior to one another at different times. At one time you may be a beggar, while at another a millionaire.

4. Expect nothing and you cannot be disappointed:

Everyone has hopes that his wishes will be fulfilled someday. It is hope that gently persuades a person to strive onwards unrelentingly in the face of difficulties and failure in order that he may reach to greater heights. This expectation of the fulfilment of his dreams in some distant future keeps him bright with optimism.

However, when a person goes beyond mere hoping and begins to expect things to happen according to his wishes, he is in for disappointments. He does good only because he expects some reward or reciprocal action. And if that reward is not forthcoming, he becomes disillusioned with performing good works.

If you do good, then do it for the sake of doing service to some fellow being. The happiness which arises in your mind together with

the performance of the deed is itself a big reward. To be happy, you should transcend the desire of getting gratitude from others for each deed performed.

In any society, gratitude is a rare virtue. This is the reason why you should remember the kindness and assistance others have given you. The Buddha considered gratitude to be a great blessing, a positive quality to develop.

But if you have rendered help to others, try not to expect gratitude in order to avoid disappointments. If you do, then you are placing your happiness at the mercy of others who are inclined to be forgetful. If they fail to show gratitude, learn to accept such ‘forgetfulness’ in good spirit. If they do remember your kindness, then treat it as a bonus in addition to the opportunity you have of serving others. If you do this, then you can be happy regardless of whether your deeds are remembered or not.

5. Tolerance, Patience and Understanding:

Occasionally people who have led good and peaceful lives complain that they have become victims of the wiles and intrigues of others. They have not caused trouble to others, yet they are harmed through no fault of their own.

Under such circumstances, the innocent victims must realize and understand that the world

is composed of a wide variety of people with their idiosyncrasies – the good and the not-so-good, the bad and the not-so-bad. Therefore, he may console himself that he belongs to the ‘good’ category, whereas the disturber of peace belongs to the ‘bad’ category. And on certain occasions, he has to put up with the misdeeds of the ‘bad’ ones.

It is like the case of the good and careful driver and the bad and reckless driver. The good and careful driver takes every precaution to drive carefully so as to avoid accidents. Nevertheless, he sometimes meets with accidents through no fault of his, but that of the bad and reckless driver. Thus, the good sometimes have to suffer because there are bad people just as there are bad drivers.

After saying all that, it is useful to remember that the really good drivers can avoid getting into accidents because they act wisely on the road and anticipate the actions of other drivers correctly. This is no different from averting potential problems with trouble-makers and evil-doers. One obvious way is to avoid associating with them as far as possible, especially when you are not in a position to change their ways. You may not have the strength to resist from being drawn into the whirlpool of hatred and vengeance.

But if you are strong enough to resist their evil influences, then you should make every effort to correct them instead of isolating and neglecting

them. They are human beings too who can be brought into the religious fold. The way to influence evil-doers to be good is through the wise practice of tolerance, patience and understanding.

Understanding will be your shield to protect yourself from their wiles, and compassion will be your flame to melt all hearts. A man often does wrong because of his ignorance or misunderstanding about himself, his desire of gaining happiness, and the way to obtain happiness. If this is so, then it is during the time when he errs that you should act consistently with your education and religious training. It is during such times of trial that the strength of your character, wisdom and compassion may be known. When others do you wrong, they offer you an opportunity to be aware of your defilements and virtues, so that with such understanding you will be able to work towards the removal of the defilements and the strengthening of your virtues.

Tolerance, patience and understanding – these are great qualities for you to practice during times when a man acts out of ignorance. These qualities can help to relieve you from the miseries, suffering and burden of life. Some people may take advantage of your goodness when you practice these qualities. But you should not feel threatened if you act wisely, because these qualities have the ability to make the wrong-doers realize their error

and the power to transform them into doing good.

6. Forgive and forget:

Taking revenge on your trouble-makers create more problems and difficulties for everyone. In contemplating vengeance, you spark off the fire of hatred within your heart and feed it the fuel of delusion to let it grow. This fire will grow so big that it can consume everything in its path, yourself first before anyone else. Hatred is like a poison which you inject into your veins, before injecting it into your enemy. It is like throwing cow dung at another: you dirty your hands first, before you dirty others.

When a person submits to hatred, he becomes no different from the evil-doer, the object of his anger. By giving in to hatred, he surrenders his self-control without coming any closer to the solution of his problem. He becomes the loser. When an angry person tries to instigate another but receives an unconcerned smile instead, he is usually overcome by a feeling of despair. He feels frustrated for not being able to upset the other person and make him angry. He is defeated because the other party has not co-operated by way of losing his head and joining in the mudslinging.

The Buddha said: "Ah, happily do we live without hate amongst the hateful. Amidst the hateful, we live without hate." You act wisely like

a cultured man by not hating or hitting back at your trouble-maker. You must understand that at that moment, the trouble-maker may have been intoxicated with greed, anger, jealousy and ignorance. He is no different from other human beings who have similarly been intoxicated at other times. Such an understanding would come to you through the practice of mindfulness.

When a person practices mindfulness, he has an intimate understanding of his motivations and desires, his weakness and strength. That self-awareness helps him to remove the unwholesome thoughts and increase the good ones. When he understands himself better, he realizes that other beings are caught in a similar predicament. He sees his fellow beings trapped in the net of self-illusion, blinded by ignorance, struggling vainly to satisfy their every desire. From that ignorance and desire, arise the performance of deeds which brings unhappiness to others and themselves. Yet, inspite of these limitations and weakness, these beings have every potential to experience spiritual growth. Realizing this, such a person develops compassion for all beings, tolerates the problems they create, and learns to forgive and forget.

The Buddha taught: "Evil-doers are not wicked by nature. Many people do evil because of their ignorance. Since they are ignorant, we should not curse or condemn them forever. We should instead

try to correct them and explain to them their error." Such compassion and understanding taught by the Buddha helps one to treat an evil-doer just as one would a patient suffering from a sickness. Instead of condemning him for being sick, you should try to remove the cause of his sickness so that he may become well and happy. By radiating compassion and loving-kindness to a person, you give him a chance to realize his folly and give up his bad habit.

Compassion and loving-kindness have the power to change a trouble-maker into a benefactor, and your enemies into friends. The Buddha once said: "Hatreds do not cease by hatred; by love alone do they cease. This is an eternal law."

If a person keeps on doing wrong to you, on your part you should correct him each time. Try to follow the noble example set by the Buddha who always returned good for evil. The Buddha said, "The more evil that comes to me, the more good will radiate from me." Some people think that it is not practical to return good for evil. By returning evil for evil they aggravate the danger of the situation. As for yourself, try to return good for evil.

When we say "return good for evil" we do not necessarily mean this in a physical sense. Rather, it is more important to develop a mental state where "loving kindness" is felt towards all beings that

inhabit the world. Develop thoughts of goodwill so that you will constantly think well of others, no matter how much they hurt or harm you. Even if you find that at this moment this is something which is difficult to perform, you still do a great service to yourself and others by not returning evil for evil.

